

Dismantle the University! The state of exception and neoliberal visions under Greek debt peonage

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Greek universities in times of crisis

In the fall of 2013, Greek universities are on the verge of a terminal collapse. They do not face only a further fatal 15% downsizing of their budgets for the next academic year, on top of the almost 50% cut over the last three years and the earlier chronic underfunding which has brought them to their knees (see the public statements of the Rector of Aristotle University [here](#)). Figures are redundant, in effect, for anyone taking a walk through a Greek university campus: they will not fail to be struck and depressed by the derelict buildings, the decaying infrastructures and the general feel of abandonment. In September 2013, however, the Ministry of Education stroke another blow against the teetering higher education by unilaterally deciding to suspend 1349 administrative posts in 8 universities without any prior consultation with the institutions.

Yet, Greek universities are known to be understaffed. Compared e.g. to the British ratio of 10.2 administrative staff members for every 100 students, the Greek average ratio is 3.6 per 100 students. At the National University of Athens, the ratio is 2/100 and yet the Ministry resolved to remove 489 non-teaching employees, that is, nearly 40% of its entire non-teaching working force. Librarians, guards, secretaries, museum, clinic and lab assistants will be gone, and the respective services will be closed down or left in limbo (see the data provided [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

Don't imagine that Greek universities are rubbish and should be justifiably consigned to the dustbin of history. They recurrently figure among the 300-400 highest ranking academic institutions in the world (see e.g. [here](#)). And in the high-tech world of cognitive capitalism, there could not be a more vital resource for the recovery of the national economy after four years in deep, war-time-like recession. In Greece, remember, there are so far no comparable private institutions and the public nature of universities is constitutionally enshrined. So, is this political resolution of the ruling center-rightwing coalition an irrational, suicidal act or yet another tragic consequence of the Memorandum, the onerous terms of the 'rescue package' agreed between the government and the IMF, EU and ECB 'Troika'?

The logic of disaster capitalism applied to the University

The short answer is 'No' to both. It is up to the Greek government to decide where to cut jobs and which public employees to move to the so called 'availability' (i.e. precarious) status in order for the required figures to add up. Moreover, if the sovereign is still the Greek people through its democratic state rather than the 'sovereign' debt, the government should always consider defaulting on its debt and fundamentally changing its course when the actual survival and the future prosperity of the people are on the line. This policy is simply the last one in a long series of similar measures over the last four years, and it does make sense in the terms of a different logic of rule which pursues a radical agenda.

In the field of the university, sovereign debt and the terms laid down by the Memorandum are wielded as a supposedly neutral, objective instrument of force to promote effective policies of privatization which are ruled out by the Constitution and were bound to encounter strong resistances in the parliament, the academia and society at large if they were to be implemented as explicit public policies (for the intention to privatize Higher Education in parts or as a whole, see the [official report and the recommendations of the OECD in 2013](#), which have been endorsed by the government; see also the analysis and historical account offered [here](#)). The unsustainable public underfunding of higher education combined with the removal of necessary non-academic staff will force universities to shrink and

die off or to further sub-contract and outsource administrative and security services to private contractors. This has been the [explicit and official response of the state's legal representatives](#) when the Council of Rectors took the case against the job cuts at the Council of the State (Supreme Court). Subcontracting and outsourcing will put increased pressure on the universities' meagre budgets, pushing them to introduce tuition fees more widely and to attract private sponsors and partnerships with private corporations. The structural adaptation of universities to the logic of the market, the pursuit of profit and the power of money will be inflicted as a matter of dire economic necessity and 'objective' financial hardship, disregarding constitutional rights which enshrine higher education as a public good, bypassing democratic procedures and decision-making, dismantling the university as a democratic institution which is equally accessible to all citizens from all walks of life.

Despite their various pathologies, Greek universities have lived up to the modern democratic ideal of the *Universitas*: a public space of higher learning, research and education which cultivates universality in several respects. The democratic university develops all sciences, natural, social and humanistic, disseminating knowledge in all areas of human endeavour; it fosters critical discourses and values with universal address, searching for truth as an end in itself and speaking truth to the powers that be; it is a social space committed to the universal freedom of expression; it is universally available to all citizens as a public good, regardless of class, gender, ethnic or other distinctions. This institution is vital for democracy conceived as a regime of collective freedom and social self-government, which is open to critique and contestation and promotes collective self-reflection on justice, truth and the public good. But precisely this universal logic and ethos are deeply at odds with the pursuit of private profit as an end in itself, the inequalities of access and influence based on material wealth, and the power asymmetries that mark competitive market economies. Hence the imperative to dismantle the University, if the market is to dominate and to expand across all social fields. What plays itself out in this assault on public universities is nothing less than a battle between the particular and the universal.

Post-political biopower: a broader mode of rule in contemporary societies

The policies afflicting Greek Universities exemplify a broader mode of rule which has been practiced in all years of life under the successive Memorandums. This violates standard operating procedures of liberal democracy and eliminates residues of democratic substance, evincing scant concern for popular consent and democratic legitimation (for a more thorough account of this logic of rule as exercised in Greece over the last three years and for detailed evidence in support of the empirical claims advanced below, see my paper Kioupkiolis, A. (2013). Towards a Regime of Post-political Biopower? Dispatches from Greece, 2010–2012. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 0263276413501705). It is a broad-ranging machine of political power, which weaves together a post-political technocratic 'pragmatism', the state of exception and its sovereign rule, and a biopower which exerts itself directly on the naked body and soul of society. Political authority becomes subordinate to international centres of power and economic force. It does not shape the co-ordinates of fundamental policies and social relations through its independent, democratically justified decisions, but it seeks rather to manage and manipulate social 'data' in the service of pre-given aims and predefined recipes which are not subject to public contest and debate.

Many policies produced in 2010-2013 are enacted under a typical state of exception. The executive suspended laws and procedures which restricted its action and exercised a tendentially unlimited and coercive power, evoking an emergency situation which called for exceptional measures in order to 'save the country' from a lethal threat. The executive raised the spectre of a disastrous state bankruptcy to pass into law international treaties of dubious constitutional legality. Government by executive decrees has become all the more routine, while the parliament is regularly forced to ratify radical reforms in industrial relations and the welfare state with little or no preparation and debate. The practice of state rule has entered a zone of indistinction between law and fact, since de facto government proceedings and decisions are converted into law and laws are increasingly stripped of any normative justification and are dictated by 'necessity' itself.

In this state of exception, individuals turn into 'homines sacri', people stripped of political rights and fully exposed to the arbitrary discretion of power and extreme misfortunes (Giorgio Agamben (1998) *The Homo Sacer*, Stanford:

Stanford University Press, p.171). Over the last three years Greek citizens have lost numerous social rights (social benefits, welfare rights, protection from unemployment, labour rights) and their political liberties were effectively trumped. The abolition of the 1349 university posts by ministerial fiat adds another link to the long chain of arguably unconstitutional resolutions. The paragraph 5 of Article 16 of the Greek Constitution stipulates that 'Education at the university level will be provided exclusively by institutions which are fully self-governed public law legal persons.' Justifications adduced for the decision appeal mainly to the imperatives of the latest Memorandum (see the statements of the state's legal representatives at the Council of the State (Supreme Court) [here](#)). Again, university staff is treated as bare bodies subject to the arbitrary discretion of the sovereign – shorn of any legal or other security against the risks of unemployment, material distress and psychic pain. The sheer show of force by the government, the precedent set by such resolutions, the declaration of intent they contain, as well as the announced second round of mergers and closures of departments, schools or even entire universities across the entire higher education system spread anxiety and insecurity among all university staff, administrative and academic, turning everyone into a potential 'homo sacer.'

This practice of authoritarian rule is far from being pointless, however, or simply a Diktat of sovereign debt service. As Klein's *Shock Doctrine* (2007) has vividly demonstrated, the thrust of these power technologies lies in the attempt to shock societies out of their habits and demands, to eradicate resistances and to create a clean slate which will enable radical social engineering in line with the neoliberal vision of full corporate freedom and minimum social spending. Massive sell-outs of public assets and enterprises, the shrinking of the welfare state and strict austerity measures are the 'positive side' of the political agenda pushed by both the Troika and the current rightwing government in Greece. The shock doctrine deploys state power to produce a state of shock which explodes familiar understandings, norms and relations, destroys established forms of subjectivity, engenders regression and disorientation, and depatterns the body social. Power can be exercised now directly on a formless, malleable bare life which can be moulded anew to create a neoliberal paradise for financial capital by inscribing new mores, perceptions, practices and institutions in the body of society: a radically transformed subject in a radically transformed world which will maximise profits for the lucky few.

Likewise, the cluster of structural 'reforms' imposed on the Greek state, economy and society in return for the 'bailout package' of the Troika has inflicted harsh material pain and suffering on popular majorities, terrorizing and traumatizing them. And this paved the way for continuous reductions in wages, welfare expenses and living standards, privatizations and the removal of legal barriers to the unfettered exploitation of labour –cataclysmic changes that would have been unthinkable without the rhetoric and the politics of terror deployed in an undeclared state of exception.

The nihilistic remainder and political opportunities

However, any attempt to rationally account for the latest round of assaults on the University should not iron out the moment of destructive nihilism and excess in this aggression, which escapes full rationalisation. To understand this leftover of irrational passion one should bear in mind that, as sites of freedom and unbounded critique, the Greek universities became in the era of *Metapolitefsi*, after the fall of the colonels' junta, hubs of radical student activism, social resistance and free critical challenge to ruling ideas. They have been stigmatized thus as 'fortresses of leftism', fields of 'leftist hegemony' or, even worse, 'asylums of lawlessness.' As the production of critical academic discourse and opposition to the neoliberal orthodoxies and the prevailing policies in Greece continues unabated, it is little wonder that a predominantly conservative, rightwing government would seize the opportunity of the debt crisis and the obligations to Greece's lenders to give vent to its long-felt resentment and to teach the disobedient universities a disciplinary lesson.

The political opportunity cuts both ways, however. The intensity of the attack helps to draw clear battle lines, brings into sharp view the stakes of the fight, awakens the awareness of established values in our public culture and raises the alarm to defend them – or to let them wither. It calls on all citizens to make an eminently political decision between two antagonistic visions of society and politics. Yet, in the state of emergency produced by the sovereign

debt crisis and the comprehensive reform agenda promoted by ruling forces, the decision to stand for a university true to its universality – in terms of access, freedom of speech and critical discourse, the pursuit of truth and learning in all fields of knowledge, the equal right of all its members to participate in its autonomous self-governance – could not stand on its own. It will have to connect up with, and to foster, a much broader struggle for the re-invention of an egalitarian democracy for all.

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